DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 551 CS 511 306

AUTHOR	Johnson, Debra
TITLE	Timely Topic: Balanced Reading Instruction.
INSTITUTION	North Central Regional Educational Lab, Oak Brook, IL.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	12p.
AVAILABLE FROM	North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Editorial Offices: NCREL, 1900 Spring Road, Suite 300, Oak Brook, IL 60523-1480. Tel: 800-356-2735 (Toll Free). For full text: http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/timely/britoc.htm.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Beginning Reading; Literature Reviews; Phonics; Primary Education; *Reading Processes; *Reading Skills; Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS	*Balanced Reading Instruction; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

ABSTRACT

A recent report entitled "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children" (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998) concludes that both phonics and whole language are important in teaching young children how to read. These two strategies--along with plenty of time for children to read, to be read to, and to write--are important components of balanced reading instruction. By providing a "Timely Topic" on balanced reading instruction within "Pathways to School Improvement," the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) aims to bring together the best resources in a central location for NCREL constituents. This paper presents a review of literature relating to balanced reading instruction and describes the benefits to children. A list of related publications, articles, and Internet resources is appended. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

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Timely Topic: Balanced Reading Instruction

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Author: Debra Johnson
Date posted: 1999

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Balanced Reading Instruction: Overview

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During the past 40 years, there has been extensive public debate on how best to teach children to read. Some educational researchers propose instruction emphasizing sound-letter relationships (phonics) while others emphasize immersion in language and literature (whole language). Often these two factions are at odds with each other. Policymakers, parents, and educators in each camp have voiced strong opinions on the merits of their respective approach and have blamed the other for plummeting reading scores or decreased interest in reading.

But some teachers have always included whole language and phonics components in their classroom instruction. A recent report titled Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children concludes that both phonics and whole language are important in teaching young children how to read. These two strategies--along with plenty of time for children to read, to be read to, and to write--are important components of balanced reading instruction.

By providing a Timely Topic on balanced reading instruction within *Pathways to School Improvement*, NCREL aims to bring together the best resources in a central location for NCREL constituents. This site presents a review of literature relating to balanced reading instruction and describes the benefits to children. It also provides a listing of many publications and articles and includes links to various Internet resources that offer additional information.

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Balanced Reading Instruction: Review of Literature

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In the history of education, few topics have sparked such public debate as the teaching of reading. Because reading is at the heart of every child's learning, it has been a principal educational focus for more than a century. Research on reading dates as far back as 1879, when a paper was published on eye movements in reading (Samuels & Kamil, 1984). In the mid-1960s, discussion of appropriate reading instruction gained prominence as a result of published research on models of reading instruction and comparative studies of the U.S. Office of Education's Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction (Venezky, 1984; Samuels & Kamil, 1984). Both of these research efforts sparked widespread interest in all aspects of the reading process, particularly at the beginning stages of learning to read. Two basic views of reading instruction grew out of this activity: the skills-based approach (which emphasizes the use of phonics) and the meaning-based approach (which emphasizes reading comprehension and enrichment).

Skills-Based Approach. The skills-based approach to reading was highly influenced by the work of Jeanne S. Chall (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In 1967, Chall discussed her efforts to identify effective practices in beginning reading instruction in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. She concluded that there are "consistent and substantial advantages to programs that included systematic phonics" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Phonics is an instructional strategy used to teach letter-sound relationships by having readers "sound out" words. In 1990, Marilyn J. Adams extended Chall's work with her review of research, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Like Chall, Adams emphasized that effective reading instruction is based on "direct instruction in phonics, focusing on the orthographic regularities of English" as well as lots of exposure to reading materials and time to practice reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

In skills-based learning, phonics skills are taught in isolation with the expectation that once sound-letter relationships are learned, meaning will follow. Emphasis is placed on intensive phonics instruction that is highly sequenced. Children learn letter-sound relationships by sounding out words. They learn letter sounds, consonant blends, and long and short vowels. Typically, this approach uses reading programs that offer stories with controlled vocabulary made up of letter-sound relationship and words with which children are already familiar. Writing instruction follows the same vein; children are asked to write only after having achieved mastery in basic spelling skills or when a correct model is provided for them to copy. This type of instruction was widely used in the 1960s and 1970s and today is being promoted as part of the back-to-basics movement.

Meaning-Based Approach. The meaning-based approach to reading was highly influenced by the work of Kenneth S. Goodman (Samuels & Kamil, 1984). Goodman was a leader in the development of the psycholinguistic perspective, which asserts that readers rely more on the structure and meaning of language rather than on the graphic information from text. He and others also noted that literacy development parallels language development. Goodman's work in miscue analysis and reading process had a tremendous impact on reading instruction, especially with early readers. (In miscue analysis, children are observed while reading orally and observers note where the children substitute words, make additions or omissions, or change the word order. This information is used to determine the strategies that children are using in their reading and to help develop ideas for remediation.) Goodman also developed a reading model that became known as the whole-language approach. This approach became popular in the 1980s and has continued through the 1990s.

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In contrast to the emphasis on phonics that is promoted by the skills-based approach to reading, the meaning-based approach to reading emphasizes comprehension and meaning in texts. Children focus on the wholeness of words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire books to derive meaning through context. Whole-language advocates stress the importance of children reading high-quality children's literature and using language in ways that relate to their lives, such as daily journals, trade books, letter writing, and writing workshops. Word-recognition skills are taught in the context of reading and writing. Comprehension takes precedence over skills such as spelling. In fact, invented spellings are encouraged when younger children are learning to write their own stories. Children learn phonics skills while they are immersed in reading; they learn to decode words by their context. Whole language also offers a supportive and tolerant atmosphere in which children learn to read.

A common but mistaken view is that whole language and skills-based instruction are dichotomous. Many educators believed that the whole-language approach would enable children to learn to read and write naturally without direct instruction if they were immersed in a literacy-rich environment (Manzo, 1999; Sherman, 1998; Routman, 1996). Some teachers erroneously interpreted this idea to mean no phonics. However, whole language was never intended to exclude phonics (Sherman, 1998; Routman, 1996). In fact, the teaching of skills in context is one of the key characteristics of whole-language education (Weaver, 1995). Instead of being taught in isolation, skills such as grammar and spelling are embedded in whole-language reading and writing activities and are based on the words that children encounter. In this framework, skills teaching arises as a result of children's needs; meaning and comprehension are emphasized (Strickland, 1998).

For years, the works of skills-based and meaning-based researchers were pitted against each other in a media war over the best way to teach reading. Now is the time to find resolution. Recent research, such as Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), confirms that the teaching of reading requires solid skill instruction, including phonics and phonemic awareness (awareness of the separate sounds in words), imbedded in enjoyable reading and writing experiences with whole texts to facilitate the construction of meaning. In other words, balanced reading instruction in the classroom combines the best of phonics instruction and the whole-language approach to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of individual children. In this combined approach, notes Diegmueller (1996), "children are explicitly taught the relationship between letters and sounds in a systematic fashion, but they are being read to and reading interesting stories and writing at the same time."

The current revival of phonics as the cure-all to all reading problems is not the answer to improving reading skills. "Phonics should not be taught as a separate 'subject' with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization," notes the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996). "The key is a balanced approach and attention to each child's individual needs." In order to accomplish this goal, teachers must keep in mind several key points, notes Strickland (cited in Sherman, 1998): First, teaching phonics is not the same as teaching reading; phonics is a merely a tool for readers to use. Second, reading and spelling require much more than just phonics; spelling strategies and word-analysis skills are equally important. Third, memorizing phonics rules does not ensure application of those rules; teaching children how to use phonics is different from teaching them about phonics. Fourth, learners need to see the relevance of phonics for themselves in their own reading and writing.

Of equal importance in literacy instruction is the emphasis on reading for meaning and the promotion of literature for enrichment and lifelong learning. Novick (cited in Sherman, 1998) states:

> "The ability to match print to sound is a crucial part of becoming an independent and fluent reader. Children also need to develop and maintain a positive disposition toward literacy and the ability to think critically and imaginatively. The challenge for teachers is to help children build a solid literacy foundation in the primary grades, one that provides not only basic skills, but also multiple opportunities to 'get lost in a story'--to reflect and reason, create 'possible worlds' through stories and dramatic play, and to share experiences, ideas, and opinions."

Schools can help all children become independent readers and writers through a balanced literacy program. The components of a balanced literacy program include reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, modeled/shared writing, interactive writing, and independent writing. In Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) outline comprehensive recommendations for literacy instruction throughout the

elementary years.

To provide balanced reading instruction, schools must give thoughtful consideration to such elements as curriculum, assessment, and professional development. In light of current research, it is imperative that curriculum be designed according to developmental stages and benchmarks and that classroom-based assessment be seamless in order to provide information for both instruction and intervention. Ongoing professional development for teachers is necessary if quality literacy instruction for all children is to be maintained.

Attention to these factors will assist schools in providing reading instruction that is, according to Weaver (cited in Sherman, 1998), "based on a coherent integration of the best of differing bodies and types of research and a theory of reading that puts meaning at the heart of reading from the very beginning, rather than as some distant goal."

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This Timely Topic was written by Debra Johnson, a freelance writer who also is a multiage resource teacher at Lincoln School in Mundelein, Illinois.

Date posted: 1999

Content and general comments: info@ncrel.org Technical information: pwaytech@contact.ncrel.org
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Balanced Reading Instruction: Internet Resources

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Online Texts

Beginning Reading Instruction: Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program (Texas Reading Initiative, n.d.)

Beginning Reading Instruction: A Practical Guide for Parents (Texas Reading Initiative, n.d.)

Best of Both Worlds (Diegmueller, 1996)

Components of a Balanced Literacy Program (Tucson Unified School District, n.d.)

Facts on Myths About Whole Language Education (Weaver, 1995)

Facts on Research on the Teaching of Phonics (Weaver, 1996)

Facts on the Nature of Whole Language Education (Weaver, 1995)

Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998)

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Phonics Link from the San Diego (CA) County Office of Education

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998)

Reading Instruction (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999)

The Reading Wars (Focused Reporting Project, 1999)

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Seeking Common Ground (Sherman, 1998)

Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success (Burns, Griffing, & Snow, 1999)

What Is the Role of Phonics in a Reading Program? (Herbruck, 1999)

What's Basic in Beginning Reading? Finding Common Ground (Strickland, 1998)

Why Talk About Phonics? (National Council of Teachers of English, 1995)

Organizations

Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement

International Reading Association

National Association for the Education of Young Children

National Institute for Literacy

Whole Language Umbrella of the National Council of Teachers of English

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